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TAGS: PGOV PREL PM
SUBJECT: PANAMA: INSIDE SCOOP ON THE QUADRILATERAL SECURITY
MEETINGS

Classified By: Ambassador Barbara J. Stephenson for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d)

Summary

¶1. (C) The aim of the recent quadrilateral meeting of the presidents of Panama, Colombia, Mexico and Guatemala was to establish the means to quickly extradite Colombian and Mexican drug traffickers from Panama to their native countries, Panamanian National Security Advisor Marcel Salamin told POLOFF January 20. He said the meeting was a Panamanian initiative, after U.S. officials informed the GOP that the U.S. could not accept suspected traffickers who did not have indictments pending in the U.S. Salamin said the key to the agreement was the development of a quick and simple mechanism for turning suspected drug traffickers over to their host countries, since Panama did not have the capacity to hold high level criminals in its prisons. He said that once agreement was reached on such a legal mechanism the four countries would move on to joint targeting of suspects, and operational planning. The agreement also calls for greater information sharing from national data bases. Salamin said he would chair a group to look into how the initiative might be linked into the Merida Initiative in the future. End Summary.

Trying to Move Out the Colombians and Mexicans

¶2. (S//NF) Marcel Salamin, President Torrijos' National Security Advisor, told POLOFF January 20 that President Torrijos had asked him to organize the meeting on security with President Calderon of Mexico, and President Uribe of Colombia. He said Guatemala had been a later addition. He said the main focus of the meeting had been to try to develop mechanisms to quickly transfer high-level drug trafficking suspects from Panama to Mexico or Colombia. He said the effort was based on President Torrijos' belief that the current crime wave in Panama was linked to the presence of representatives of the Colombian and Mexican drug trafficking cartels in Panama. Salamin said that after Embassy officials explained to GOP officials that the U.S. could not accept

suspects who were not under indictment in the U.S., the GOP began to plan this initiative. He said Panama wanted to cooperate fully with Colombia and Mexico to arrest these criminals, but needed a very fast judicial mechanism to get them out of the country because it did not have the high security prison capacity to hold them for even relatively short periods of time. Salamin asserted that the cartels sent representatives to Panama because drug shipments changed possession in Panama from the originating cartels in Colombia to Mexican cartels that transport the drugs to the U.S. He said Panama was particularly worried about Mexican drug trafficking cartels bringing more people into Panama by taking advantage of a "wave of immigration" from Mexico to Panama, as a result of the economic crisis in the U.S. Salamin said Guatemala had been an add-on, and that it had been more trouble than it was worth to bring them into the process, due to the fact that President Colom did not have any loyal intelligence service upon which he could rely, noting that the Army and Police were both penetrated by drug traffickers and not very loyal to President Colom.

Quickie Extraditions

¶3. (C) Salamin said the meeting had revealed a legal vacuum that had to be dealt with before Panama could deliver suspects to Mexico and Colombia. He said Panamanian law had a procedure known as "simple and conditioned deliveries" (*entregas simples y condicionadas*) that allowed the GOP to turn over dangerous suspects in Panamanian custody to foreign governments that have more serious charges against them. Salamin asserted that the procedure was very fast and not subject to judicial appeal. He said it was originally designed to allow Panama to quickly move dangerous drug trafficking suspects that Panama could not hold to the U.S. for prosecution. Salamin said Colombian and Mexican law did not recognize this procedure, greatly restricting Panama's ability to pursue Colombian and Mexican drug traffickers, since Panama did not have the capacity to hold them in custody for long periods while a traditional extradition made its way through the courts. Salamin said that Colombia had been "assigned" the task, following the meeting, of reviewing all the existing extradition and legal assistance agreements and treaties among the four countries, and then presenting one unified document that all four could adopt that would bring all the agreements together. Salamin said the idea was that this document would contain an acceptable mechanism for the rapid transfer of suspects to Mexico and Colombia.

Joint Targeting

¶4. (C) Salamin said the four presidents ordered another group to follow up after the meeting as well. This group would be made up of one or two personal representatives of each president, discuss specific information on possible drug trafficking targets, and plan operations to arrest them. For Panama, the representative to this meeting would be the Director of the National Intelligence and Security Service (SENIS) Erik Espinosa and possibly Salamin as well. Salamin said no actual operations would take place until a mechanism had been worked out to allow them to quickly be turned over to their native country. Salamin told POLOFF on January 27 that he had given Colombian officials a list of 60 Colombians that the GOP suspected of drug trafficking and were ready to arrest and turn over to Colombia once a mechanism had been found, and assuming Colombia had judicial cases against them. He said Panama had identified 500 Colombians, Mexicans and Guatemalans it was prepared to move against eventually.

Intel Sharing

¶5. (C) Salamin said that the presidents had also agreed to greater information sharing from national databases. He said

Colombia would give Panama access to its criminal and civil databases (not intel data bases), so that Panama could quickly and easily identify Colombian suspects in Panama. Colombia would also provide Panama real-time access to a finger print database that would allow Panama to fingerprint Colombians and check the results against Colombia's records. At present, Panama did not have real-time access. He said Mexico was sending people down next week to look into ways to allow Panama to connect its database on suspected drug traffickers with Mexico's larger "Plataforma Mexico" database. Salamin said he had proposed the creation of a program like the USG program for visa waiver countries, whereby visitors had to provide their personal data to immigration officials on-line before they could get on the plane. He said this type of program would give them time to run the names and identify suspicious individuals.

Comment

¶ 6. (C) Last November, First Vice President and Foreign Minister Samuel Lewis approached the Ambassador and asked that the USG do more to remove dangerous drug trafficking suspects from Panama, due to the GOP's fear that Colombian and Mexican drug trafficking organizations were increasing their activities in Panama and contributing to an increase in crime. National Intelligence and Security Service (SENIS) members later approached Embassy DEA officers with a list of prisoners in Panamanian jails who they said President Torrijos considered too dangerous to keep in custody, due to the risk they would bribe or shoot their way out of jail, and asked that the USG quickly take them out of the country for prosecution. While some were under indictment in the U.S., others on this list had no cases pending in the U.S., and no real prospects of being indicted. DEA officers explained that the USG could not act against anyone if there were no charges against them in the U.S. The quadrilateral meeting seems to have been a direct consequence of the GOP's discovery that the USG could not take all the drug traffickers in Panama out of the country. The agreement worked out among the three (Guatemala does not seem to have played an important part, and Salamin did not seem excited about the idea of adding more Central American countries to the initiative) is a win-win proposition. Panama will work closely with Mexico and Colombia to track down wanted drug traffickers in Panama and arrest them, as long as a mechanism can be found to allow them to be sent home rapidly and easily. Panama is not/not willing or able to hold these prisoners in Panama. For Mexico and Colombia, the agreement offers the chance to weaken the cartels, while Panama becomes a much less hospitable place for them to operate in. The GOP's ability to put this meeting together so quickly, and to get such good press out of it is very impressive, and shows what the GOP is capable of when it sees its interests being served by regional cooperation. Salamin indicated he would look at how the Merida Initiative might plug into this quadrilateral initiative in the future.

STEPHENSON